

Persian-Achaemenid Bell-Shaped Column Bases from the South Caucasus: New Evidence

Iulon Gagoshidze

(Tamaz Beradze Institute of Georgian Studies, The University of Georgia)

David Gagoshidze

(Tamaz Beradze Institute of Georgian Studies, The University of Georgia)

Abstract: Near the village of Karajamirli (West Azerbaijan) archaeological excavations have revealed the center of one of the satrapies (according to Herodotus - XI satrapy) of the Persian-Achaemenid Kingdom. It appears that the residences of the provincial rulers in this satrapy were the Persian-Achaemenid palaces uncovered prior to the discovery at Karajamirli - Saritepe (Azerbaijan), Gumbati (Georgia) and Beniamin (Armenia). A distinctive characteristic shared by all these archaeological sites is the presence of colonnaded halls. Two types of column bases have been discovered at Karajamirli: angular plinth bases and the so-called bell-shaped bases. A similar situation is observed at Beniamin. These two types are common for the capital cities of Achaemenid Iran. In contrast, only bell-shaped column bases were unearthed at Gumbati and Saritepe. In Kakheti, northwest of the village of Sabatlo, the base of a column similar to the angular plinth bases of Karajamirli and Beniamin was discovered. Two kilometers northeast of Gumbati, in a place known as Saaklemo, a six-columned hall has been uncovered. At the same location, another part of a column base was found by the landowner. The column bases are bell-shaped; however, they differ from the bases of Gumbati and Karajamirli in terms of ornamentation. None of the tori of Saaklemo's column bases have been preserved. Approximately 20 kilometers northwest of Saaklemo, near the village of Chabukiani (Kakheti), a limestone bell-shaped column base was discovered. The peculiarity of the base is that its torus is

made separately and adjusted to the body. Chabukiani column base was decorated in the identical fashion as the Saaklemo column bases. It is also probable that the torus of the Saaklemo bases were made separately. It is beyond doubt that all of these column bases were carved locally in the South Caucasus, implying the existence of specialized stone workshops. Creative activity appears to have continued in these workshops, as evidenced by the bases from Saaklemo and Chabukiani, for which no direct parallels have yet been identified in the imperial core. According to Burkhardt Wesenberg's classification of Persian-Achaemenid bell-shaped bases, four types are distinguished. The bases from Chabukiani and Saaklemo show some similarities with types C and D, but we consider them to represent a different, fifth type (E). The bell-shaped bases from Gumbati, Saritepe, Beniamin, and Karajamirli belong to type B.

Keywords: South Caucasus, Achaemenid Iran, Achaemenid Architecture, Bell-Shaped Column Base

Introduction

In the 5th-4th centuries BCE, almost all spheres of material culture in the South Caucasus underwent noticeable changes, many of which researchers associate with Persian-Achaemenid influence (Gagoshidze 1996, 125-136; Knauss 2006, 79-118). This hypothesis seems plausible, particularly when considering that, according to Herodotus, Persian power extended to the Caucasus Mountains (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.97). Recent archaeological excavations in Eastern Georgia (Kakheti region) and Western Azerbaijan, conducted between 2006 and 2023, have provided evidence not only of Persian-Achaemenid influence but also of the presence of Persians in the South Caucasus. For instance, in Karajamirli (Azerbaijan), a palace complex was uncovered that likely served as the residence of a satrap (according to Herodotus, this would correspond to the XI satrapy [Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.92]).¹ The palace discovered in Karajamirli (excavation leaders: Ilias Babaev, Iulon Gagoshidze, and Florian Knauss) is comparable to the palace of Xerxes at Persepolis and was likely constructed by craftsmen trained in Persepolis (Knauss, Babaev and Gagoshidze 2010; Knauss, Gagoshidze and Babaev 2013; Knauss and Babaev 2016; Fassbinder et al. 2021; Gagoshidze and Gagoshidze 2024). The use of stone architecture and adobe bricks was one of the innovations of the Achaemenid period

¹ Two more Iranian satrapies reached the South Caucasus: the eighteenth satrapy (southern part of present day Armenia), where the Matiens, Saspers, and Alarodians lived, and the nineteenth satrapy (south-eastern coast of the Black Sea), where the Moskhs, Tibarenes, Macrones, Mosinikes and Mares lived (Herodotus, *Hist.* 3.94).

in the South Caucasus, accompanied by the introduction of characteristically Persian-Achaemenid architectural elements such as columned halls with bell-shaped column bases. It appears that the residences of the provincial rulers in this satrapy were the Persian-Achaemenid palaces uncovered prior to the discovery at Karajamirli. These include the sites of Saritepe in Azerbaijan (head of the excavations: Ideal Narimanov; see Narimanov 1980), Gumbati in Georgia (head of the excavations: Kiazio Pitskhelauri and Andreas Furtwängler; see Pitskhelauri and Dedabrishvili 1973; Furtwängler and Knauss 1997) and possibly Beniamin in Armenia (head of the excavations: Felix Ter-Martirossov; see Ter-Martirossov 2001, 158-161). A distinctive characteristic shared by all these archaeological sites is the presence of colonnaded halls.



FIGURE 1. Column Base from Sabatlo (© The Authors)

Column Bases

Two types of column bases have been discovered at Karajamirli²: angular plinth bases and the so-called bell-shaped bases. A similar situation is observed at Beniamin, where both

² The bell-shaped base uncovered during earthworks in Karajamirli in the 1970s was first publicly mentioned by Azerbaijani archaeologist Ideal Narimanov at a scientific conference in Saarbrücken in 1995. In 2001, Narimanov personally accompanied I. Gagoshidze, F. Knauss, and I. Babaev - who had traveled from Baku to Karajamirli to examine the find - to show them the base (Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauss 2007, 31).

angular plinth and bell-shaped column bases were also used. These two types are commonly found in the capital cities of Achaemenid Iran, such as Susa and Persepolis. In contrast, only bell-shaped column bases have been uncovered at Gumbati and Saritepe (Knauss, Gagoshidze and Babaev 2013). The bell-shaped bases from Karajamirli and Gumbati are not only stylistically similar but are also carved from limestone sourced from the same quarry, suggesting they may have been produced by the same workshop (Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauss 2007, 33).

As it was mentioned above, Karajamirli Palace is a precise analogue of the Palace of Xerxes at Persepolis and dates to the first half of the 5th century BCE. It was abandoned by the end of the 4th century BCE. Similarly, the palaces at Saritepe, Beniamin, and Gumbati also date to the 5th century BCE (Knauss, Gagoshidze and Babaev 2013; Knauss 2006; Knauss and Babaev 2016).

In 2010, at the extreme eastern point of Georgia in the Kakheti region, on the right bank of the Alazani River northwest of the village of Sabatlo, the base of a column was accidentally unearthed during the planting of an arable plot on the river's second terrace (Knauss, Gagoshidze and Babaev 2013, 4; Gagoshidze and Gagoshidze 2024, 295; Fig. 1). It was discovered at a depth of 0.8-1.0 meters below the surface. Alongside it, a broken corner of another similar base and a fragment of an architectural detail - presumably a column capital - were also found, all carved from the same type of stone. These fragments have since been transferred to Dedoplistskaro, where they are preserved at the archaeological base of Ilia State University.

Inspection of the ploughed terrain revealed that the plow had also damaged the walls of the charred old building: charcoal, burnt mud bricks, and parts of wall plastering - including painted sections - were scattered across the area. However, it is clear that the plow only partially destroyed the building, leaving the floor unharmed. The exceptional quality of the column base carving, as well as the measurements (the column's lower diameter is 52 cm), indicate that we are dealing with a palace (or temple). A tiny pottery collection suggests that this structure dates back to the 5th-4th centuries BCE. The column bases of Sabatlo are similar to the angular plinth bases of Karajamirli and Beniamin (Gagoshidze and Gagoshidze 2024, 295).

From 2018 to 2022, the joint archaeological expedition of the Georgian National Museum and the Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich, led by Iulon Gagoshidze and Kai Kaniuth, resumed work in the Alazani Valley. It was discovered that there another Achaemenid-period palace is located approximately 2 kilometers northeast of Gumbati, at the site known as Saaklemo, where various storerooms, including the six-columned hall, have been uncovered. The column bases are bell-shaped; however, they differ from the bases of Gumbati and Karajamirli in terms of ornamentation (Fig. 2). At the same location (Saaklemo), another part of a column base was discovered by the landowner, Zurab Shiukashvili, during plowing and was subsequently taken to his home. The fragment is



FIGURE 2. Bell-Shaped Column Bases from Saaklema (© The Authors)



FIGURE 3. Bell-Shaped Column Base from Saaklemono (Kept in Jugaani; © The Authors)



FIGURE 4. Bell-Shaped Column Base from Chabukiani (© The Authors)

currently kept at his residence in the village of Jugaani, Signaghi Municipality (Fig. 3). None of the column bases found at the Saaklemo site have preserved their torus, which was likely removed and broken during land cultivation. The entire field is scattered with limestone fragments. As a result of the 2020 field investigation, radiocarbon analysis of burnt grain from Saaklemo Palace indicated a date earlier than 400 BCE (Gagoshidze and Kaniuth 2020; Fassbinder et al. 2021; Gagoshidze, Kaniuth and Gagoshidze 2021, 94-99).



FIGURE 5. Bell-Shaped Column Base from Chabukiani (© The Authors)

Approximately 20 kilometers northwest of Saaklemo, near the village of Chabukiani in Lagodekhi Municipality, a limestone bell-shaped column base was discovered in a pit dug by graverobbers on the flattened summit of a high Bronze Age kurgan, located in a grove on the left bank of the Alazani River (Fig. 4). The artifact is currently kept in the office of the nearby hunting farm (farm director: Teimuraz Tkemaladze).

The height of the column base, made of dense white limestone, is 52 cm, the bottom diameter is 83 cm, and the diameter of the support circle of the column is 56 cm (Fig. 5). The peculiarity of the base is that its torus (thickness: 15 cm) is made separately and adjusted to the body (Fig. 6). Unlike the bell-shaped bases of Saritepe, Gumbati, Beniamin and Karajamirli, in which the lotus petals are simple, here the ornament is more complicated: two registers of lotus petals are displayed, and in the upper part of the base the bottom of these petals are formed by a row of semicircular locks.



FIGURE 6. Chabukiani Column Base: Separately Made Torus and the Bell-Shaped Body (© The Authors)

All six bases of the six-columned hall of Saaklemono and another base discovered during the agricultural work in the same location were decorated in the identical fashion (Fig. 7) as the aforementioned Chabukiani column base. These bases are likely contemporary. It is also probable that the torus of the Saaklemono bases were made separately. Two-part column bases are characteristic of Persian-Achaemenid architecture, with comparable examples found at Persepolis.

As we examined the pit where the Chabukiani column base was discovered, we collected pieces of large ceramics. A braided decoration adorns the white engobed piece. Braided twelves are also used to decorate the second straw-colored piece. The third piece features carved ornamentation depicting waves. It is inconceivable to exclude the Achaemenid period when dating of these pottery pieces. We believe that the Chabukiani

base should also be dated to the 5th century BCE (Gagoshidze and Gagoshidze 2024, 295-296).



FIGURE 7. Bell-Shaped Column Base from Saaklemo, Kept in Jugaani (© The Authors)

Conclusion

Bell-shaped bases of the Achaemenid type, apart from those found in the central regions of the kingdom, have so far been identified only in the South Caucasus (Babaev, Gagoshidze and Knauss 2007, 34), where, as noted above, such bases have been discovered at six different sites. It is beyond doubt that all of these column bases were carved locally in the South Caucasus, implying the existence of specialized stone workshops. Creative activity appears to have continued in these workshops, as evidenced by the bases from Saaklemo and Chabukiani, for which no direct parallels have yet been identified in the imperial core.

According to Burkhardt Wesenberg's classification of Persian-Achaemenid bell-shaped bases, four types are distinguished. The bases from Chabukiani and Saaklemo show some similarity with its C and D types, but differ from both in the row of volutes in the upper register of the bell-shaped section and in the more elaborate form of the flower petals descending along the midsection. We believe that the bases from Saaklemo and Chabukiani should be considered a distinct, fifth (E) type. The bell-shaped bases from

Gumbati, Saritepe, Beniamin, and Karajamirli belong to type B (Wesenberg 1971, 141-145).

References

- Babaev, Ilias, Iulon Gagoshidze, and Florian Knauss. 2007. "An Achaemenid "Palace" at Qarajamirli (Azerbaijan), Preliminary Report on the Excavations in 2006." In *Achaemenid Culture and Local Traditions in Anatolia, Southern Caucasus and Iran, New discoveries*, edited by Askold Ivantchik and Vakhtang Licheli, 31-45. Brill.
- Fassbinder, Jorg, Sandra Hahn, Mandana Parsi, Florian Becker, Marko Wolf, Iulon Gagoshidze, and Kai Kaniuth. 2021. "Persian Residences in the Southern Caucasus: Latest discoveries in the Periphery of the Achaemenid Empire." *ArcheoSciences, revue d'archeometrie* 45:55-58.
- Furtwängler, Andreas, and Florian Knauss. 1997. "Archäologische Expedition in Kachetien 1996. Ausgrabungen in den Siedlungen Gumbati und Ciskaraant-Gora. 3. Vorbereicht." *Eurasia Antiqua* 3:353-87.
- Gagoshidze, Iulon. 1996. "The Achaemenid Influence in Iberia." *Boreas, Münstersche Beiträge zur Archäologie* 19:125-36.
- Gagoshidze, Iulon, and David Gagoshidze. 2024. "A Newly Discovered Monument of Persian-Achaemenid Architecture in South Caucasus." *Chronos, Journal of the Ivane Javakhishvili Institute of History and Ethnology* 5:293-305.
- Gagoshidze, Iulon, and Kai Kaniuth. 2020. "A Brief Report on the 2019 Fieldwork of the Georgian-German Gumbati Archaeological Expedition." *Collection of the Short Reports of Archaeological Excavations Conducted in 2019*:239-243. [in Georgian]
- Gagoshidze, Iulon, Kai Kaniuth, and David Gagoshidze. 2021. "A brief Report on the 2020 Fieldwork of the Georgian-German Gumbati Archaeological Expedition." *Collection of the Short Reports of Archaeological Excavations Conducted in 2020*:94-99. [in Georgian].
- Knauss, Florian. 2006. "Ancient Iran and Caucasus." *Iranica Antiqua* 41:79-118.
- Knauss, Florian, and Ilias Babaev. 2016. "Xerxes in Aserbaidshān. Eine persische Residenz am Rande des Weltreiches." *Antike Welt* 6:70-76.
- Knauss, Florian, Ilias Babaev, and Iulon Gagoshidze. 2010. "A Persian Propyleion in Azerbaijan, Excavations at Karacamirli." In *Achaemenid Impact in the Black Sea*,

- Communication of Powers*, edited by Jens Nieling, and Ellen Rehm, 111-22. Aarhus University Press.
- Knauss, Florian, Iulon Gagoshidze, and Ilias Babaev. 2013. "Karačamirli: Ein persisches Paradies." *ARTA* 004.
- Narimanov, Ideal. 1980. "Finds of Column Bases of the 5th-4th Centuries BCE in Azerbaijan." *Soviet Archaeology* 4:162-4. [in Russian]
- Pitskhelauri, Kiazio, and Shio Dedabrishvili. 1973. "Preliminary Results of the Field Work of the Kakheti Archaeological Expedition". *Dzeglis megobari* 33:27-35. [in Georgian]
- Ter-Martirossov, Felix. 2001. "The Typology of the Columnar Structures of Armenia in the Achaemenid Period". In *The Royal Palace Institution in the First Millennium BC: Regional Development and Cultural Interchange between East and West*, edited by Inge Nielsen, 155-63. Aarhus Universitetsforlag.
- Wesenberg, Burkhardt. 1971. *Kapitelle und Basen: Beobachtungen zur Entstehung der griechischen Säulenformen*. Rheinland.



© 2025 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY-NC-SA) 4.0 license.

